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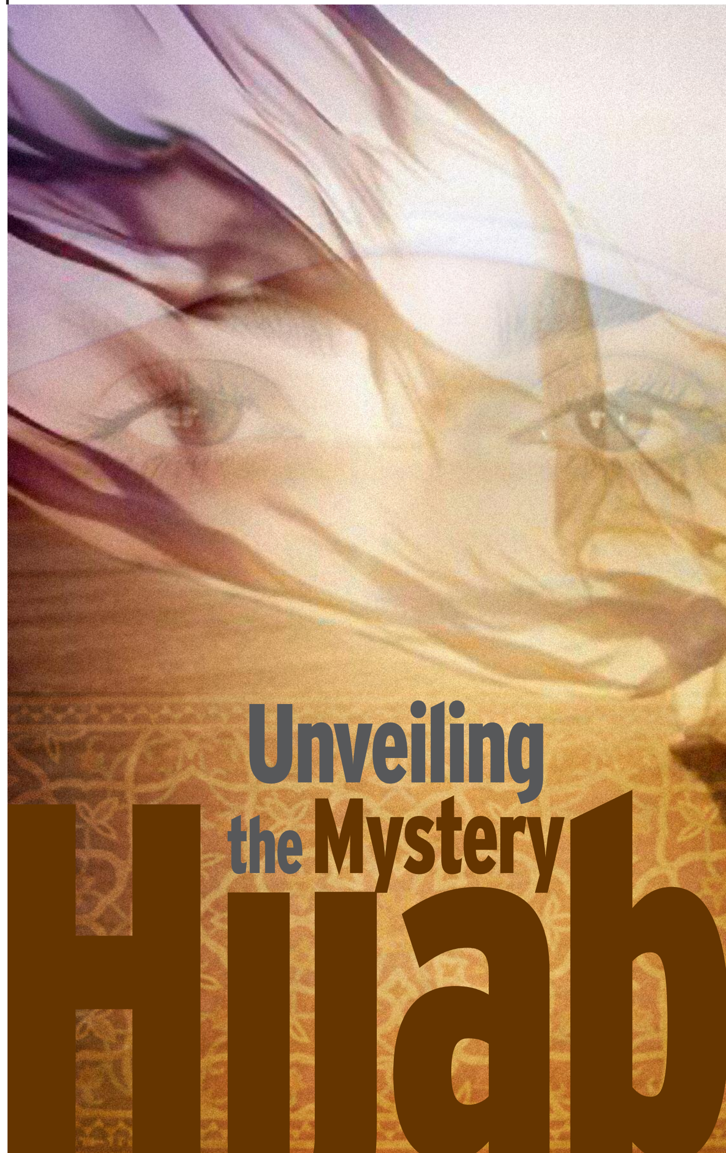
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Unveiling the Mystery Hijab

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In the Name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

Hijab is not merely a covering dress, but more importantly, it is behavior, manners, speech and appearance in public. The headscarf is an outer manifestation of an inner commitment to worshipping Allah - it symbolizes a commitment to piety.

American Muslim women today are rediscovering the pristine Islam as revealed by Allah, (God), to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh[1]), more than 1,400 years ago, but without any of the contradictions of ancestral culture. Consequently they are essentially engaging in a life-long exercise of rediscovering their own selves – what it means to be a human, a Muslim, and more so, a Muslim woman. Wearing a head-covering (hijab) is an important part of their spiritual journey.

One of the most common questions today, asked by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, is: "Why do Muslim women cover their heads?" The answer is very simple - Muslim women observe hijab because Allah has told them to do so:

"O Prophet, tell your wives and daughters and the believing women to draw their outer garments around them (when they go out or are among men). That is better in order that they may be known (to be Muslims) and not annoyed..."(Qur'an 33:59).

Muslims believe that their sole purpose in life is the worship of God alone, according to His instructions, as revealed in the Holy Qur'an, and through the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed (pbuh). As such, wearing the hijab is an act of obedience to God and, hence, forms the primary basis for wearing it.

Generalizations about Islam and Muslims are replete in today's media. Muslim women in headscarves are frequently unfairly stigmatized. They are regarded on the one hand as oppressed, and on the other, as fanatics and fundamentalists. Both depictions are grossly wrong and imprecise. Such portrayals not only misrepresent these women's strong feelings towards hijab, but also fail to acknowledge their courage and the resulting identity hijab gives them. There are even bans on wearing the hijab in some countries. When asked about this, Aminah Assilmi, a Christian convert to Islam, said: *"To ask me to go out without my hijab would be like asking a nun to go topless. It amazes me, and I cannot help but wonder, if they would have ordered Mary, the mother of Jesus (pbuh) to uncover her hair."*

Another misconception is the belief that Muslim women are forced to wear hijab. For the vast majority of Muslim women, nothing could be farther from the truth. Indeed, deciding finally to wear hijab is often difficult.

Hijab: a form of an internal moral system

Days of meditation, fear of negative consequences and reactions from family and/or the wider American society, and ultimately, the need for plenty of courage weigh heavily in reaching the decision. Wearing hijab is a very personal and independent decision, coming from appreciating the wisdom underlying Allah's command and a sincere wish to please Him.

"For me, the lead up to the decision to wear hijab was more difficult than actually wearing it. I found that, al hamdulillah (praise be to God), although I did receive negative comments from people, I appreciated the feeling of modesty wearing the hijab gave me, and ironically, the negative attention made me feel more proud to be identified as a Muslim," remarked Katherine Bullock, a Canadian convert to Islam.

"To me hijab is a gift from Allah. It gives me the opportunity to become closer to Allah. Also quite importantly, (it provides me) the chance to stand and be recognized as a Muslim," Fariha Khan of Rockville, Maryland, said.

While the hijab identifies women as followers of Islam, with it comes tremendous responsibility. Hijab is not merely a covering dress, but more importantly, it is behavior, manners, speech and appearance in public. The headscarf is an outer manifestation of an inner commitment to worshipping Allah – it symbolizes a commitment to piety. Self or inner morality is what gives meaning to the external scarf. This can be perceived from the overall demeanor of any Muslim woman – how she acts, dresses, speaks, and so on. In a land where misinformation about Islam and Muslims abounds, Muslim sisters have the opportunity to portray Islam in its true light

Saba M. Baig, a graduate of Rutgers University, NJ, was 17 when she seriously started wearing hijab. She feels that she is still in the process of learning internal hijab. *"My biggest realization was that hijab was not just about wearing a scarf on my head, but more of a (veil) on my heart,"* said Baig. *"Hijab is more than an external covering. That's the easy part of it all. It has a lot (more) to do with modesty and just the way you present yourself."*

Imaan, a convert to Islam, adds, *"Unfortunately, it also has its down side: you get discriminated against, treated as though you are oppressed… I wear it for (Allah), and because I want to. Period."*

Katherine Bullock observed that *"after I started wearing hijab, I noticed that people would often behave more circumspectly with me, like apologizing if they swore. I appreciated that. I feel that wearing hijab has given me an insight into a decent and upright lifestyle."*

Hijab is an Act of Modesty. Modest clothing and hijab are precautions to avoid social violations. The following verses of the Qur'an highlight that this is not limited to women only.

"Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that will make for greater purity for them; and Allah is well acquainted with all that they do. And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; and that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what must ordinarily appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands…"(Qur'an 24:30-31)

According to Jabir ibn Abdullah, when he asked the Prophet (pbuh), about a man's gaze falling inadvertently on a strange woman, the Prophet replied, "Turn your eyes away" (Muslim). In another tradition, the Prophet (pbuh) chided for looking again at a woman – he said, the second glance is from Satan.

So, contrary to popular belief, Muslim and non-Muslim, hijab is not worn for men; to keep their illicit desires in check – that is their own responsibility, as the above verse and Prophetic sayings show. Rather, Muslim women wear it for God and their own selves. Islam is a religion of moderation and of balance between extremes. Therefore, it does not expect women alone to uphold society's morality and uprightness. Rather, Islam asks men and women mutually to strive to create a healthy social environment where children may grow with positive, beautiful, constructive and practical values and concepts.

In fact, for many women hijab is a constant reminder that they should not have to design their lives and bodies for men. *"Before I started covering, I thought of myself based on what others thought of me. I see that too often in girls, their happiness depends on how others view them, especially men. Ever since, my opinion of myself has changed so much; I have gained (a lot of) self-respect. I have realized whether others may think of me as beautiful is not what matters. How beautiful I think of myself and knowing that Allah finds me beautiful makes me feel beautiful,"* Baig recounts.

The concept of modesty and hijab in Islam is holistic, and encompasses both men and women. The ultimate goal is to maintain societal stability and to please God.

Since Muslim women are more conspicuous because of their appearance, it is easier for people to associate them with the warped images they see in the print and broadcast media. Hence, stereotypes are perpetuated and Muslim women often seem "mysterious" to those not acquainted with the religious meanings of hijab. This aura of "mystery" cannot be removed until their lifestyles, beliefs and thought-systems are genuinely explored. And, this cannot be achieved until one is not afraid respectfully to approach Muslim women – or men for that matter. So, the next time you see a Muslim, stop and talk to them – you'll feel, God-Willing, as if you're entering a different world, the world of Islam: full of humility, piety, and of course, modesty!

Wearing hijab is a very personal and independentdecision, coming from appreciating the wisdom underlying Allah's command and a sincere wish to please Him.

1. (p) here stands for "peace be upon him"